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Colleges Lead Way: Curiosity, Faith, Discernment, Mission are Key

When Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism, he taught parents to teach their children to ask questions. After quoting the content of our faith—the creed, the commandments and the Lord’s Prayer—he taught us to ask, “What does this mean?” As a result, Lutherans believe that faith seeks understanding and that reason—even when infected by sin—does not stand in opposition to it.

When I visit the colleges and universities of the ELCA, students ask questions. They engage my mind and renew my spirit. Along with inspired administrators and faculty, they lead the way as the colleges of this church reach out in mission for the sake of the world. The colleges of this church:

Nurture unquenchable curiosity: In this culture, lives are too busy and possessions too plentiful. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Lutherans were known for our unquenchable curiosity? Luther’s unquenchable curiosity about the meaning of faith for our lives permeated his vocation and mission.

This curiosity has become a critical part of the vocation of our colleges: to plant deep within students a lifelong unquenchable curiosity about God and the centrality of faith, curiosity about themselves, about the vastness of the cosmos and the intricacies of DNA; curiosity about the richness of history, the beauty of the arts, and the complexities of science, math and economics. These colleges believe religion has a contribution to make as we engage life’s large questions. May our colleges encourage such curiosity throughout the denomination.

Nourish faith formation and exploration: Even in a time of fear, when we are distrustful of others and possessive of what we have, faith frees us to be engaged in the world. The colleges seek to nourish faith through campus ministry. In religion classes, faith is stretched and challenged as students explore the Bible and are exposed to the religious beliefs and practices of others. As communities of faith formation and exploration, our colleges

are places where students not only explore and share their faith but also hear the faith stories of others. May they be communities of faith formation, exploration and lively conversations.

Model moral deliberation: Many are weary of this society’s contentious and polarized debates. Colleges can be beacons of hope as students return from experiences abroad or service projects in the U.S. As they do, they remind us that we must live globally, think critically, act locally, work collaboratively and live faithfully.

Colleges can be centers that teach us the art of public moral deliberation: creating safe spaces for people to gather; establishing rules for respectful engagement; and seeking solutions for difficult questions. In such contexts, colleges provide both the expertise of resource people and the capacity to bring people together to engage in moral deliberation. May our colleges lead us to become such communities of discernment for the sake of the world.

Prepare students for engagement in the world: One of the gifts Lutherans bring to the church, to higher education and to the world is the Lutheran understanding of vocation. ELCA colleges provide opportunities for students to explore the many contexts and relationships into which God calls us to be engaged for the sake of the world. Students report deep appreciation for the encouragement by our colleges to discern their gifts and passions. May our colleges be communities of preparation for our varied callings in families and neighborhoods, in congregations, as citizens of nations and the world, and as stewards of the environment.

The colleges and universities of this church have a vocation to call us to stand outside ourselves so we might be engaged together, reaching out in mission for the sake of the world. I am grateful to God for these schools and their unquenchable curiosity, faith, moral discernment and engagement in mission.